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Response to Gossy - 2

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Response

Scott Morgensen

Professor Mary Gossy's reading of *Don Quixote* reminds us of the value of *not* consigning our lives to formulaic storytelling, in which commitments to sure origins block a story's ability to change (or to change us). She reminds us that when we question formula as our means for meeting social life, the possibility arises of dialogue that might enable relationship with difference. She draws these insights from Cervantes's text, including questions of gender and sexuality, and suggests ways in which we may question formula and meet difference in our lives today. My response pursues these themes by emphasizing where Professor Gossy's words meet certain stakes in contemporary feminist and queer theories. I then consider one arena from my research where we can see these themes being powerfully articulated today: in transnational queer cultural production and community organizing, which diagnose the conditions of our globalizing world.

Gossy explores Cervantes's "hatred of formula," which warns his readers that myths of surety will fail to comprehend self and other. We find that Don Quixote defends a sense of separate, original self that is, in fact, not permanent, but a fabrication of his interaction with formulaic texts. His love of formula leaves him adrift from the specificities and complexities of social life, and precludes his transformation by interaction with others. Gossy helps to reveal how tellers of stories of origin imagine an unchanging foundation for subjectivity, even though they speak from current cultural politics imbued by difference. In doing so she reminds us that their origin tales tell much more about their lives today than about any truth of what was or is to come. But Gossy does not just note this error in origin stories; she also explains that it endangers storytelling's promise to create relationship. The image of addressing someone who reads e-mail while pretending to listen moved me to consider a related image, of someone claiming to witness you while only seeing a story projected upon you, and so failing to meet you on the terms in which you know yourself. Formulaic reading and writing act like this when they dismiss dialogue and forcibly translate varied stories into one in order for communication to begin. Gossy proposes an end to the "oblivion and stupidity" by creating relationship with difference, in which persons in dialogue meet the new and unpredictable, entering a state of "radical undefendedness."

Here, one might see that what one thought to be natural, fundamental, or true—for oneself or for all—may hold no meaning for the person whom one meets. Indeed, one might realize that having known of the existence of difference was never identical to entering relationship with it, for that encounter will unsettle all one thinks one knows—about difference, and about oneself. Gossy seems to be suggesting that relationship with difference only arises once difference may continue to be. Relationship, here, will mean not assimilation, nor even identification, but an intimate understanding of difference's integrity. In the form of dialogue, this will produce at least *two* vulnerable people, no one made vulnerable to the imposition of another's formulaic story. In the form of learning, this will release our attachment to stories that refuse to change, inviting instead the mind of a beginner, in which new knowledge upends the sure sense of self and other, while we open to imagining new stories that can describe our shared worlds.

Such principles are the promise of feminist and queer theories and politics today. They are also the realization of the people and practices that inspire feminist and queer work. Gossy allows for this insight by reading gender and sexuality in Cervantes's text, and on that basis letting us imagine how questioning formula and meeting difference might transform our lives.

Gossy marks certain feminist effects of Cervantes's critique of formula, by which he exposes the misreading of gender and sexuality in chivalric narrative. In the text, we meet prostitutes, servants, and many other women who hear Don Quixote's stories of sexual purity, control, violation, and redemption, and then stand amazed at his utter failure to represent them. Gossy argues that by revealing this emptiness in Don Quixote's desires, Cervantes evades a troubling representation of women that, ironically, remains common in literature that would claim him as ancestor. As she puts it in a related article:

The dilemma of feminist theory about representational practices has been that when the female body is depicted, it is invariably transgressed in some way (de Lauretis 103-57) and that the only way to preserve the female body from transgression is to consign it to the realm of the unrepresentable—an equally problematic fate because it exiles women from discourse... . [N]o women's bodies are sacrificed to the narration of *Don Quixote*. In this, despite the fact that it is so often called the first modern novel, the text is atypical of the Western narrative tradition. It suggests what is still a narrative innovation...a practice that writes and reads the

female body without destroying it, objectifying it in male desire, or exiling it from the powers of discourse into the unrepresentable.¹

Gossy's feminist appreciation of Cervantes's text helps us question misogynist stories, which would make violence or control the nature of sexuality and gender, and invites us to meet the myriad differences that women present.

Gossy also explores what might interrupt formula by reading the Q, which invites consideration of a compatibility between Cervantes's critique of formula and the critique of normativity in queer theory. When she asks "what makes the letter Q so queer?," her use of queer suggests all that is odd, strange, or different—all that exceeds our ability to explain, contain, or ignore. This was the intent of feminist scholars, including Eve Sedgwick² and Judith Butler,³ when they invoked the term *queer* to signify a refused yet irrepressible other, made of criminal exiles and mutable excesses, and lurking within stories of nature, including heterosexuality and its sex/gender system. Butler called the sexualities and genders required by heterosexuality "regulatory fictions." They must repeat themselves endlessly in order to attain a semblance of nature, even as they create and police a dangerous outside in order to perceive their purported normality, by contrast.⁴ Yet, that now-unnatural, queer outside becomes a creative and critical site: the exiled then interrupt normativity by revealing its construction, and multiply sexual and gendered differences that skip the beat of repetition, by rubbing against the grain or offering a shock of surprise. Thus, when Gossy describes Q's interruption of O to mean it must "mar the repeatable," or that Q's usage means it "needs U in order [to] mean anything," I sense images for breaking repetition and meeting differences that can build the insights of queer theory as a feminist theory of all that myths of natural sex refuse. Caring for the queer invoked here means we will question the creation of normative boundaries and their origin stories, which inevitably produce a dangerous outside, even as we will choose to live in a world of endlessly proliferating and unsettling differences.

Gossy's readings of gender and sexuality in *Don Quixote* together offer a key insight of feminist and queer theories: the ultimate impossibility of refusing relationship with the differences pervading social life. Masculinist and heterosexist power arise to subordinate or eliminate varieties of gender and sexuality. Yet, if we ground our everyday lives in expecting a relationship with those differences, then formulaic sto-

ries of sexuality and gender will be open to question, and new learning can begin. Feminist and queer theorists ask this practice of all people—not only of those to whom it is new, but also of themselves. All projects must therefore question investments in formulas that prevent relationship with difference and, thus, with our social world.

Launching from the title of Professor Gossy's talk, I will suggest some routes of culture along which we see these ideas being practiced today. In my work, I meet them most dynamically among queer subjects who critically engage the conditions of contemporary globalization. In migrations, diasporas, and transnational organizing, queer subjects travel the circuits of power that animate a globalizing world. The identities and communities they form by their very existence destabilize the legal, scientific, and religious doctrines and national, racial, and sexual regimes that would contain or erase them. Gayatri Gopinath, in her book *Impossible Desires*, examines how South Asian queer women writers and filmmakers create transnational dialogues that call into question fundamentalism, communalism, and heteronormativity, while enabling alternative sexual and gendered lives for women. Martin Manalansan, in his ethnography *Global Divas*, illustrates how gay Filipino economic migrants in the United States negotiate the gaps of U.S. hegemony and Filipino nationalism, forming a hybrid traveling culture that is anti-racist, anti-imperial, and queer. In her book *Queer Latinidad*, Juana Maria Rodriguez maps a cultural space made by Latino subjects who cross the virtual and material borders of the Americas, while questioning national and sexual essence. She studies the example of the San Francisco, California, organization Proyecto Contra SIDA, in which Latina and Latino youth protect their lives against misreading as immigrants, mainstream gays, or at-risk, by creating queer activism that defies national borders. In such scholarship, which Roderick Ferguson has called "queer of color analysis" or that Gopinath names "queer diasporic" critique, we meet subjects who unsettle naturalized ideas of national, religious, racial, and sexual community, as those who never entirely fit, and who then connect across great differences in newly mixed and mobile networks.⁵ Tracing their movement describes global power as the intersection of national, economic, racial, gendered, and sexual processes, even as it suggests how such power might be circumvented or transformed.

While these formations model global travels that link people across great differences, they also direct us as readers on a route home, to a new encounter with the self. In my case, such formations return

me to the sites I occupy that historically marginalized them; namely, mainstream sexuality and gender studies, and sexual minority politics. Queer of color and queer diasporic critics have noted that U.S. lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) formations, despite opposing dominant sexual regimes, often share their investments in nationalism, capitalism, and whiteness, and tend to reproduce their exclusions. My scholarship responds to this observation by investigating why and how such investments arose historically in sexual minority politics, and by theorizing how they may be critiqued and transformed today. I explain racial and national normativity in U.S. sexual minority politics by demonstrating how those politics act as a Settler formation, which inherits the conquest, marginalization, and appropriation of indigenous people. Settlers and Native people each have sought control over Native culture, including matters of gender and sexuality. During the twentieth century, Settler sexual minorities noted a historic acceptance of sexual diversity in many Native societies, and on that basis claimed a place within them, framing their sexual identities through imagined intimacy with past or present Native people. This strategy expanded in an era of multiculturalism, when Settler sexual minorities could appear to be honoring cultural differences even while claiming Native culture to be their own.⁶ Such practices were challenged when Native lesbians and gays documented their social and spiritual roles in their Nations, thereby defying the decimation of those roles by colonial policy on family and religion, and argued for their renewal against assimilation and outsider appropriation. Today, Native lesbians and gays promote a new identity, "two-spirit," which links traditional roles in varied Nations to their contemporary border-crossing communities, as in the International Two-Spirit Gathering that for seventeen years has connected lesbian and gay American Indian, First Nations, Inuit, and Kanaka Maoli/Native Hawaiian people. Two-spirit people today lead work against HIV and AIDS in Native communities, as in the Toronto NGO Two-Spirit People of the First Nations, which has organized the Indigenous People's Satellite at the 2006 International AIDS Conference. In such contexts, two-spirit becomes an identity that both recalls the past and invents the future, by accounting for myriad Nations' discrepant histories while linking them in unprecedented transnational alliances.⁷ Two-spirit organizing against HIV/AIDS has made sexuality and gender central to explaining the material effects of colonization and globalization in indigenous communities worldwide.⁸ As a result, two-spirit people, who under terms of colonial culture could be

rejected as aberrant, now lead new transnational indigenous organizing on community health, international law, and sovereignty, while defending and renewing indigenous tradition.

Without necessarily sharing identities, two-spirit organizers, Latino AIDS activists, Filipino gay migrants, and queer South Asian cultural workers may be read together for the ways that they foster sexual and gendered differences that adapt the infrastructure of colonization and globalization—assimilation, economic migration, diasporic community, transnational organizing—in a challenge to normative power. Their critical practices shatter the formulas of colonial heteronormativity, including their uses in the racial, gendered, and sexual logics of globalization. And their identities and communities model relationship with difference by bridging the distances set by conquest, migration, and diaspora, in alliances that do not sacrifice specificities in order to forge connections. They promise crucial knowledge of our interconnected world: traveling their once-silenced or delegitimated routes reveals both how power functions globally and how that power is being transformed. Feminist, queer, critical race, and globalization studies (alongside many disciplines) must take on the work of explaining the intersecting sexual, gendered, racial, economic, and national powers constituting their lives. Social movements such as sexual minority politics must respond to their critiques of normativity and new models of organizing. All can start by refusing to dismiss the differences queer of color and queer diasporic formations present, and entering accountable conversations with them that will lead to new relationships and new learning.

The implications of such conversations are already explored for us by Gossy in her reading of the relationship of Sancho to Don Quixote. She writes that through his recurrent disagreements with Don Quixote's stories, Sancho becomes the one character in the text to consistently and forthrightly engage Don Quixote. While others reject Don Quixote for his bizarre and obnoxious claims, Sancho—having found what Gossy calls "a tiny space for agreement" in the imagined governorship—asks him to reflect on the limits of his claims and to consider alternate views. Sancho thus invites Don Quixote into dialogue, a practice that Gossy suggests offers the gift of trust: that one's listener will hear and wish to respond. As she says, "to call someone crazy can be a way to shut down any possibility for dialogue with them, to eradicate relationship with them." In refusing to give up on Don Quixote's ability to reflect and change his mind, Sancho expresses what I will

describe as a form of compassion. Gossy calls this charity, by which I understand her to mean not the “help” of patrons for clients, which sustains the very hierarchies it purports to evade, but the more archaic meaning of an effortless, no-strings-attached kindness. I will note that Sancho expresses at least one further degree of compassion. Despite occupying the position of a traditional servant and facing a self-styled master who dismisses all alternative views, Sancho does not indulge in a (justifiable) rejection of Don Quixote’s arrogated authority. He takes a more subversive path. Precisely by *not* dismissing Don Quixote in return but engaging the man in conversation, Sancho subtly yet deliberately shifts their hierarchical relationship toward the greater equality of two-way communication.

The relationship of Don Quixote and Sancho presents a door through which we can imagine our lives entering transformative dialogue. We can first follow Gossy in re-reading the implications of Cervantes’s story, including its relevance to questions of gender and sexuality. Then we might ask where in social life similar relationships arise. Where do we see traditional authorities summarily dismissing perspectives that challenge their own? Whose lives then are cast as unnatural, unworthy of full social rights, too political, or simply so marginal as to be incidental to the major matters of the day? In contrast, where do we see marginalized people endeavoring not to reject, but precisely to engage and transform those who have historically dismissed them? The dismissal of dialogue is the normal operation of normative power. Entering dialogue undermines that power because the new learning it initiates reveals the limits of formula and the promise of difference. In the movements I discussed, as their members or their witnesses, we meet differences that break the repetition of formula—as Gopinath suggests, making impossible subjects possible—while fostering border-crossing conversations. I invite us to direct our collective inquiry about our globally interconnected lives along the maps such movements draw. The routes we follow surely will lead to transformative knowledge about all our lives and deepened relationship across differences.

Notes

1. Gossy 1995, pp. 18, 24, 27.
2. Sedgwick 1993.
3. Butler 1993a.
4. Butler 1990b.
5. Ferguson 2004, p. 2; Gopinath 2005, p. 3.

6. Morgensen 2005.
7. Thomas and Jacobs 1999.
8. Kairaiuak 2002.

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